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## LORD LEIGHTON'S ART.<sup>1</sup>

IN this sumptuous volume, with nearly a hundred illustrations, including representations of most of the artist's most important works, and with eighty pages of letterpress giving descriptions of the remainder, and information about the illustrations and the artist's career, we have sufficient material, when eked out with recollections of some of the originals, for a careful estimate of Leighton's position in the world of art. To give point and definition to our investigation, we will cast it in the form of an answer to the question: Why, with all his culture, learning, and accomplishments, his loyalty to fine ideals, love of beauty, and seemingly inexhaustible capacity for labor—why was Leighton not a great painter? A glimpse into the years of his apprenticeship, years of learning and wandering, will afford a point of departure for our exposition, and reveal the successive influences that played upon his spirit.

Frederic Leighton came of a family of scientific culture, both his father and grandfather having been physicians of eminent attainments. He was the eldest of three children. His sister married Major Sutherland Orr, and wrote a biography of Robert Browning, of superior quality. From his mother, apparently, he derived his artistic temperament and delicacy of constitution. She was an invalid, and in 1840, before the boy was ten years old, the family left England for the Continent, in search of a health resort, going first to Rome. So began for him eighteen years, most impressionable years, of European life and travel, away from his native island, in Italy, Germany, and France, going the round of their great and capital cities. At Rome he began to take lessons in drawing. He was sent to school at Frankfort, whither he repeatedly returned for instruction and inspira-

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic, Lord Leighton, late President of the Royal Academy of Arts. *An Illustrated Record of His Life and Work.* By Ernest Rhys. London: George Bell & Sons. 1898.

tion. In 1844, when he was in his fourteenth year, we find him in Florence, his professional career decided, entered as a pupil at the Academy of Fine Arts. It was an unfortunate beginning for the impressionable lad, for the institution was in the last stages of academism, and a bent was given to his genius which the corrective influences of after years could never wholly straighten. On the other hand, he acquired a taste for the works of Giotto and his school, though this may not have been until after his return to Frankfort to complete his education, when he came under the influence of the painter Steinle, one of the German Pre-Raphaelites, a man of intense religious fervor and æsthetic earnestness, and a thorough teacher. To him Leighton owed more than to all his other masters. Leaving Frankfort at the age of seventeen, the youth went to Brussels, where he spent the revolutionary year 1848, painting under no supervision, and thence, the year following, to Paris, where he was just about as independent, studying in a truly Bohemian life school. Aware of his need of more and definite instruction, he put himself afresh under Steinle at Frankfort, in 1850. After two years of tonic labor there, having learned about all that Steinle could teach him, his thoughts reverted to Italy; and by his master's advice, and furnished with a letter of introduction from him, he journeyed to Rome to enter the studio of Cornelius, one of the early Pre-Raphaelites, who had developed into a (very) German Michael Angelo. The French classical artist Bouguereau was in Rome at that time, and to him Leighton was indebted for cultivation of his sense of form and composition. Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning spent the winter of 1853 in the Eternal City, and concluded with their young fellow-countryman a warm friendship, that ended only with life. In 1855, at the age of twenty-five, he finished his first great picture, on a theme suggested by Vasari, sketched under the direction of Steinle, and altered under the criticism of Cornelius: "Cimabue's Madonna Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence." It was exhibited in London in the rooms of the Royal Academy, in May of that year, and achieved the success of novelty. The

artist himself accompanied it thither, but paid his native land only a flying visit, returning immediately to the Continent, and settling this time at Paris, from whose painters he felt that he still had somewhat to learn, especially in the way of coloring. There he remained until the death of Ary Scheffer, the one French painter who reflected the inspiration of Pre-Raphaelitism, and whose friendship he especially cultivated, in the summer of 1858. After that he made his home in London, continually resorting for recreation to the palms and temples of the south, traveling ever farther afield, as, for example, in 1866 in Spain, up the Nile in 1868, and to Damascus in 1873.

And now what manner of man do we meet, as a resultant of all these varied influences? A polished gentleman who has moved among distinguished people, and is distinguished himself in figure, manner, and expression; cultivated by much travel, and acquainted with the languages, literatures, and arts of many nations; sensitive to beauty, fully equipped to extract the utmost refined enjoyment out of life and to confer it upon others, having raised his natural talent to its highest power by diligent application; an æsthetic temperament that has been submitted to romantic and classic, mediæval, scriptural, antique, and oriental influences; that is too catholic in its sympathies to pour itself along any one line with the intensity that means greatness, and is without the fire of genius to fuse these elements in its own white heat—an academic artist, in a word, a new eclectic.

Leighton has put on record his admiration of the Florentine genius, “that strange mixture of Attic subtlety and exquisiteness of taste with a sombre fervor and a rude Pelasgic strength.” His choice of a subject for his first æsthetic manifesto, “Cimabue’s Madonna,” shows the strength of his mediæval sympathies at that time, and of these there are other examples in the volume under review, sufficient to show that he was once not as alien in spirit to the English Pre-Raphaelites, his contemporaries, as has generally been supposed, and, when coupled with his German Pre-Raphaelite training, to compel the inference that, had he returned to England instead

of to Rome after leaving Steinle, in 1852, he would have been drawn into the guild, like Millais, by the potent attraction of Rossetti. Among the data on which this conclusion is based are an out-and-out Pre-Raphaelitic study, in pencil, of a lemon tree, a marvel of minute, patient, and accurate detail; a three-quarters' length figure of "A Condottiere" in his armor, his strong countenance turned upward with an expression of apprehension that finely renders the precariousness of his position—more expression, in fact, than the artist often succeeded in giving to his faces: and last, but not least, the duo entitled "Golden Hours," in which the slender fingers of the musician, his drapery and pose, mass of dark hair, olive skin, and sensitive, pensive features, which strikingly recall the ideal of Christ in art, must have delighted Rossetti, and indeed look as if they had emerged from one of his pictures. Beside the branching foliage of the lemon tree and other studies of leafage, we remark a study of a curly female head that suggests the work in silver-point of the great artists of the renaissance, notably Leonardo.

In the field of illustration we have mention of some drawings for George Eliot's "Romola," a congenial subject, as it appeared as a serial in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and reproductions of four out of our artist's nine contributions to Dalziel's Bible Gallery. Into the furtive figure of the first murderer he has read quite too much of the modern consciousness of guilt; his "Moses Viewing the Promised Land"—with no very lively interest, apparently—is an old sheik, in somewhat massive draperies for the climate and so steep a climb, a figure without expression or significance, that utterly fails to impress one in spite of its elevation above the scenery—it is stilted rather than impressive; while his "Samson" is throttling instead of rending a lion not nearly his size. Leighton certainly saw Bible scenes through German Pre-Raphaelite eyes; in these productions the method of Steinle, but not his fervent faith, is betrayed in every line.

Other scriptural subjects, "David Watching the Flight of Doves," "Rizpah Defending the Corpses of Her Sons from Beasts and Birds of Prey," and "Elisha Raising the Shu-

nammite's Son," leave the beholder cold, and reveal the fact that our artist was devoid of the Hebraic genius. A New Testament subject, "And the Sea Gave Up the Dead Which Were in It," is a reminiscence of Cornelius' manner.

Cognate to Biblical themes, of course, are Oriental ones; but we have it on the admission of Mr. Rhys, the author of our monograph, that the most picturesque memorial of Leighton's wanderings in the Orient is not pictorial but architectural—the famous Arab Hall which he added to his house, to enshrine some precious blue tiles that he brought from Damascus. It has a dome and arched windows of stained glass above a fountain falling into a black marble basin, and about the latter a tessellated pavement strewn with Persian rugs; arched recesses, with Cairo lattice-work, between white marble columns, their capitals richly and quaintly carved; and every least detail of furniture and decoration, even to the vases niched in the walls, was carefully composed—affording, we are told, the best representation of an Oriental interior of which London can boast.

Strange to relate, the very year of the painter's visit to the glowing East (1873) is that which marks the period when his coloring began to grow cooler, reflecting, no doubt, the growing encroachment of the antique and sculptural upon his art.

In portraiture our artist proved himself, by one or two fine examples, a worthy successor of the famous portraitists who have presided, in a descending scale of merit, it is true, over the Royal Academy, from Sir Joshua Reynolds and Sir Thomas Lawrence to his immediate predecessor, Sir Francis Grant. We do not refer to his (mostly insipid) likenesses of young ladies, but to profiles of two men, Capt. Richard F. Burton and Signor Costa, that are characterized by a virility that is in refreshing contrast to most of his work, and that makes one wish that he had left us more of the same kind. When he was just fifty years of age he executed a full-faced likeness of himself, by request, for the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. There is a touch of effeminacy in the curls so carefully disposed upon the forehead, and in

the multiple folds of silken drapery that wreath the shoulders and arms. As a background we have a bit of the Parthenon frieze, showing the rhythmic play of the bodies and legs of some horses and their riders—and therein lies a parable: by that little artistic touch the painter associated himself forever with his ruling passion, if he can be said to have had a passion, and with that phase of his art by which he will always be remembered.

“The art of Greece,” he once told the students of the Royal Academy, “is as the sudden upleaping of a living source, reflecting and scattering abroad the light of a new and a more joyous day; a spring at which men shall drink to the end of all days, and not be sated.” And on another occasion he referred to the “perennial freshness of Athenian art, the serenest and most spontaneous that men have ever seen.” And where in all the world, Greece itself included, could he drink as deeply of the spring of Hellenic beauty as in his own London, most of it a wilderness of sordid ugliness, with its harsh climate, dark days, and impenetrable fogs, yet containing in its mighty museum the matchless treasures of Attic sculpture. In their presence, we may well believe, the spell of Grecian beauty stole over the artist’s soul and led it captive. Leighton had an instinctive sense of form, which he had laid under careful cultivation; his very temperament, in its restraint and equable balance of forces, was classic; and we can see plainly how naturally he gravitated into the sure and well-beaten paths of classic tradition.

The manifesto of his new style, dating from the year 1865, was the somewhat disappointing “Helen of Troy.” Surely, one is tempted to exclaim, these were not the features for which two continents went to war! The artist’s devices for securing a magical effect—the light reflected from the pavement, striking up the flowing profusion of Helen’s draperies; that from the white coils of her mantle irradiating throat and chin; and chiefly the floating glory upon her waving hair—avail not to conceal the vapidness of the countenance, to which the curve of the eyebrows gives a sugges-

tion of querulousness. The profile of the attendant, Clymene, is far more interesting. In the full, well-rounded contours of the heroine's wrist and ankle, leg and arm, is displayed the painter's preference for a ripe and well-fed type of womanhood, not troubled with nerves.

The ensuing year he exhibited his most important picture since the "*Cimabue's Madonna*," and, like it, a sacred pageant, the "*Syracusan Bride Leading Wild Beasts in Procession to the Temple of Diana*"—the animals, says Mr. Rhys, with a touch of irony, being reduced "to a pictorial seemliness and decorative calm very fortunate under the circumstances." And now at last we come to a work that we can enjoy almost without reserve, "*Dædalus and Icarus*," the beautiful adolescent figure and profile of the latter relieved against fluttering drapery, while below and in the distance are seen a Cretan seaport on a sickle-shaped promontory, mountains, and a winding bay. One cannot fail to be struck by a slightly vulgarizing concession to the British Philistine, unworthy of the artist and an otherwise noble conception; the youth is not entirely nude; a wisp of drapery is drawn across his loins. The voluminous and wildly contorted folds of old Dædalus' mantle exhibit one of Leighton's persistent mannerisms—a glaring example of it is afforded by his "*Greek Girls Playing at Ball*"—strange and inconsistent in one who criticised a school of German sculptors for their "vehement crinkling and tossing of draperies!" Such draperies as some of his were never seen on sea or land; they suggest the casts one sometimes sees of the convolutions of the brain. They are more mannered than the Bolognese; one surmises that something of that old Germanic and Dureresque fondness for crumpled textiles survived in his Teutonic blood. But the worst of it all is their poverty of texture; some have a positively papery look, like tissue that has been drawn through the hands.

The picture last mentioned, apart from this reprehensible extravagance that besets and bewilders the eye, has several attractive qualities—a charming architectural, marine, and mountainous background, and especially an air of lifelike-



ness breathed into the moving figures. This point is illustrated in another pleasing scene of ancient domestic life in the open air, entitled "Winding the Skein." Leighton was not archaistic, and for this we owe him thanks. He did not fall into the error of painting statuary. His ancients are real people, and remind us that their creator was a contemporary of Mr. Lawrence Alma Tadema, that master in the art of rendering familiar the life of long ago, and Mr. Marcus Stone, who has done the same for another classical period, the eighteenth century.

Comparison of the pictures just coupled together brings out a feature that is found to run all through our painter's productions, and so may be termed another mannerism—his practice of placing a beauty spot on his pavements, preferably a fallen pomegranate, and, if not that, a rose, a sprig of laurel, a sandal; in "Winding the Skein" it is a few balls of thread.

In 1876 Leighton's art touched its high-water mark. He exhibited that year his masterpiece, another pageant like the two already mentioned, and, like them, of religious motive and destination, but superior to either, "The Daphnephoria," or novennial procession on its way from Thebes to a shrine of Apollo, bearing emblems of the god and of a Theban victory won by his aid. This splendid work, over seven feet in height by seventeen in length, fairly disarms criticism; it is as though the painter had arrested the joyous, rhythmic flow of Hellenic life, according to our ideal; for it is impossible to believe that the actuality can have been as harmoniously beautiful. In a creation like this, the "Icarus," and one or two others, our artist has snared, as in a net, some of the evanescent charm, the Elysian glamour of ancient Greece, and this alone suffices to countervail all adverse criticism; for who would not forgive and forget many failures in the case of any one who had dowered the world with works of such beauty? In "The Daphnephoria" Leighton's idiosyncrasy is most completely and successfully epitomized (even the young naked boys in the rear of the procession have ribbons athwart their middles), with commendable avoidance

of excess in any direction; and his ability to represent movement, showing faithful study of Botticelli, a master in that line, is consummately displayed. In his inclusion of dancing among the fine arts we have interesting evidence of his delight in life in motion, and the converse of his power to represent it is an equally remarkable power to depict the perfection of repose, tropical languor, and the self-abandonment and unconsciousness of sleep. This is marvelously rendered in a picture of this period, "Summer Moon," and later in "Cymon and Iphigenia," with no untruthful idealization of the features of the sleepers.

The "Cymon" suggests a word about his composition. Beside the great processional pictures, roughly isocephalic, we have a few with groups at the ends, at the head and feet of a recumbent figure in the centre, the groups generally relieved against the boles and lower leafage of great trees, between which, and above the central figure, the gaze is led away into an illimitable perspective. "Hercules wrestling with Death for the Body of Alcestis" is a fine example in point, though here the distant view is broken by a group just back of the recumbent figure. Then we have duets like "Winding the Skein" and "Greek Girls Playing at Ball," with classic landscape backgrounds, and, most numerous of all, what we might by analogy call solos: single figures, often between marble columns, a glimpse of sea and sky beyond and between. Such are the famous nudes, "Venus Disrobing for the Bath," "Phryne at Eleusis," and "The Bath of Psyche," the last of which brings us down to the year 1890. Variants upon this theme are "Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon," "Nausicaa," "The Last Watch of Hero," "Farewell," "The Frigidarium," "The Bracelet," and "Day Dreams."

Leighton's nudes were severely criticised for the abnormal paleness of their flesh tints. The explanations of his apologists—that he practiced selection, that he held that art has a law of its own, that he followed an ideal scheme of color—savor of the amusing inference that he didn't do better not because he couldn't but because he wouldn't. But

an artist who could paint expression like Da Vinci, flesh like Titian, texture like Velasquez, chiaroscuro like Rembrandt, could not possibly choose an inferior way. Leighton did not paint like those and other great masters simply because he couldn't; and this brings us to the gist of our criticism. The juxtaposition of his name and theirs is incongruous, ludicrously so. Leighton is high in the rank of decorators; he is utterly out of the class of great painters. And the explanation, to adopt his own words, lies in his lack of "unreserved obedience to Nature." He wrote beautifully of that noblest Attic attribute of "high truthfulness;" he explained the greatness of the artists of the Italian renaissance by the fact that they were "flung on the bosom of Nature—where safety is." Had he so flung himself, with whole-souled devotion, we might not now have to say of his art, as he said when contemplating the cathedral of Cologne: "We are not thrilled by the kindling touch of Genius."

The mere name of "Phryne" suggests Praxiteles, and it is with that preëminent sculptor of beautiful women and youths that one instinctively associates Leighton, through his graceful and elegant treatment of the same subjects, though he lacks the winsomeness of the great Greek. A more critical comparison would be with Thorwaldsen, the modern Praxiteles, at least in his carving of beautiful boys. We pause here a moment to pay our artist a tribute of praise for a very pleasing fresco, "Cupid with Doves," between pots of roses, the composition prettily filling its lunette; while especially admirable, for its naturalness, is the figure of the boy.

The pose of the "Eastern Slinger" is a relaxation of that of the Borghese Gladiator, with which it is interesting to compare and contrast it, while akin to the anatomical strain of the Rhodian school is the "Hercules Wrestling with Death"—a figure worthy of Signorelli—and the bronze statue of an "Athlete Strangling a Python;" for after what has been said the fact that our hero also essayed the art of sculpture can cause no astonishment. In this field his model of "The Sluggard" is refreshing in its naturalness.

In conclusion: for every count against Frederic Leighton we can score one to his credit. It is said that his work is lacking in realism, but then it is free from the pedantry of archaism; that his color is recondite, his olive, amber, crimson, plum; that he was so fastidious in his pursuit of beauty that it sometimes degenerated in his hands, as his biographer admits, into "artificial prettiness;" but then he has left us nothing ugly or revolting. It may be said, and with truth, that the paintings of the President of the Royal Academy, the head of English Art, like the precisely contemporaneous dramas of the poet laureate, the head of English literature, lacked the one thing needful: that he was too conscious for genius (Leighton himself said that "unconscious work has become and will be henceforth all but impossible"); that he was narrow in his range of subjects and expression of emotion (he held that strong passions are unsuitable subjects for art); that he would not trust the inspiration of the moment—and any who will read the chapter on his method of constructing a picture, draping the nudes, etc., will understand this absence of spontaneity, and will at least stand in reverence before the painter's amazing learning, patience, and precision. If genius were indeed nothing beside an infinite capacity for taking pains, Leighton would possess the attribute in a high degree. A serious charge (perhaps the explanation of the foregoing) is the total absence of religious feeling, of spiritual beauty, from his work, and it is true that it all breathes a spirit of æsthetic secularism; but on the other hand it is not didactic or homiletic, it does not preach or moralize. It is charged with equal truth with not speaking the vernacular, with being un-English, unnational, and out of touch with the present; and it does seem like an exotic in Britain, like some rare agave, azalea, or nymphæa of the conservatory. Nothing more incompatible with reform bills, strikes, socialism, and the Salvation Army could well be imagined; but then it has the virtue of helping us, for a while at least, to forget these things, sufficiently insistent as they are, in and out of season. Leighton's art is not insular, not provincial; it is free from the British besetting æsthetic sin

of domesticity and sentimental story-telling. We must give our hero the credit of never pandering to the public; he never painted potboilers, though, to be sure, he was never subjected to the terrible temptation of poverty. He brought into English art what it most needed; Continental and humanistic influences and sense of form. His drapery is never slack nor shapeless, but always gives one a highly satisfactory sense of the supporting structure underneath; and he must always be studied for his skill in depicting motion and rest.

We read on the last page of the memoir, with a certain compunction, our artist's own frank admission: "I am not a great painter." Criticism of so gracious a personality seems misplaced; it is like breaking a butterfly upon a wheel, it is ungenerous and ungrateful to find fault with one who so gently turns for us upon their hinges the iron gates of this workaday age, giving us a glimpse into a golden world of ideal beauty, serenity, and harmony, bathed in Hellenic light, where everything moves to music, and whence we may catch at intervals faint murmurs of the Ægean Sea.

The volume closes with a few illustrations that reveal an unforeseen power of rendering landscape, explaining much in the backgrounds formerly noted, and prolonging and deepening our admiration of the artist's sense of form. Genius has been defined as the power to accomplish great ends with apparently inadequate means; and in these closing scenes the elements are few and simple, but the impression they make is deep. We know not what it is that entralls the gaze in the "Coast of Asia Minor Seen from Rhodes"—merely a strip of tranquil sea streaked with darkening ripple, and some ranges of low hills, one black as night, their sculptured contours silhouetted against a spacious evening sky—but over all there broods a sense of profound peace.

GREENOUGH WHITE.